

DE GRUYTER
OLDENBOURG

CROSSING BORDERS, CROSSING CULTURES

POPULAR PRINT IN EUROPE (1450-1900)

Edited by Massimo Rospoche, Jeroen Salman, Hannu Salmi



STUDIES IN EARLY MODERN AND
CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN HISTORY



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Massimo Rospoher, Jeroen Salman, Hannu Salmi (Eds.)
Crossing Borders, Crossing Cultures

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Massimo Rospoher, Jeroen Salman,
Hannu Salmi (Eds.)

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Jean-François Botrel and Juan Gomis

“Literatura de cordel” from a Transnational Perspective

New Horizons for an Old Field of Study

1 “Literatura de cordel” as a field of study

In Spain, as in other European countries, the 1960s marked the beginning of studies on popular printed literature. The studies conducted by Robert Mandrou on the *Bibliothèque bleue* and by Victor Neuburg on chapbooks are recognized as pioneering works that laid the foundation for fruitful lines of research on both sides of the English Channel, and in Spain Julio Caro Baroja blazed the trail with the publication in 1969 of his *Ensayo sobre la literatura de cordel*¹. In addition to contributing decisively to a reassessment of popular printed culture as a field of study and providing a rich interdisciplinary analytical perspective (Caro Baroja was an anthropologist), that book coined the definition “literatura de cordel”. The term was used to refer to a heterogeneous mass of printed matter that was short and inexpensive, crude in appearance and widely distributed, which had circulated in Spain since the early days of printing. The term was a modern invention, alluding to the supposed custom of sellers of popular prints of hanging their wares on strings to offer them to the public. Despite being a neologism, not used by contemporary printers, sellers, or readers, the expression “literatura de cordel” has achieved success among scholars of Spanish popular printed culture, mainly because it gives coherence to a corpus of great textual and physical diversity.

In Spain, *pliego suelto* (single sheet) was the name given to the basic unit of paper that was used by all the printers to make books. The *pliego suelto* was the basis of *literatura de cordel*. Works of this kind were published on a single *pliego suelto* folded twice (producing a booklet with eight pages), on half a *pliego*, or on two, three or four *pliegos* joined together. As a result, studies frequently use the term *pliego suelto* or *pliego de cordel* to refer generically to the printed matter of which *literatura de cordel* consisted. With the publication of the first *pliego suelto* in Spain in 1482, this publishing formula began a successful career that lasted over four centuries. Printers very soon realized that the production of *pliegos de cordel*, which could be made quickly and sold immediately, brought them easy income.

1 J. Caro Baroja, *Ensayo sobre la literatura de cordel*, Madrid 1969.

Note: This work forms part of the research project PGC2018-097445-A-C22, financed by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (Spain).

From then on, the publishing genre of *literatura de cordel* gradually expanded and diversified over the centuries. The textual and physical diversity of *literatura de cordel* makes it hard to establish definite boundaries for it, or a precise taxonomy. The genre was modelled by the printers, especially those who concentrated on producing popular literature, adapting their range to the demands of their readers, adding and removing titles, enlarging their collections with various kinds of printed material, and combining texts that had a long tradition with newly created work, as we can see in their sales catalogues. It could be said that, basically, printers were the real creators of *literatura de cordel*.

As a result, the typology of the printed material of which the genre consists is very varied². The *romance* must, of course, be singled out, because of its numerical importance. "Romance" is a problematic term in various ways: on the one hand, in an international context it may lead to confusion because it is identical with the English word "romance". In the Spanish context, however, the word *romance* refers to the meter that has been most popular since medieval times, consisting of octosyllabic lines of verse with assonant rhymes in even lines. Because of the prominence of *romance* verse in *literatura de cordel* as a whole, many *pliegos sueltos* with texts that used this rhyme system were called "romances". Thus the term was used to define the printed material.

The *romances* that were printed as *pliegos sueltos* over the centuries were diverse. In the first half of the sixteenth century, they were traditional *romances*, epic, historical or chivalric, which had been transmitted orally since medieval times. From 1550, *romances* began to incorporate matters that eventually predominated in *literatura de cordel* as a whole: news about crimes ("casos horribles y espantosos" horrible, dreadful cases), miracles, natural disasters, wars, political events (coronations, royal marriages, births of princes and princesses), or stories of captives (Christians captured by the Turks). In Spain, compositions of this kind whose main aim was informative (about real or fictitious happenings) were called "relaciones de sucesos" (accounts of events)³. Fiction also had a place in *romances*. Mostly in the form of amorous adventures in which the lovers experience a series of incidents in their attempts to overcome the obstacles that are placed between them. Another subject that is very much present in *romances* is religion, with texts for the teaching of the Catholic doctrine, for devotion to the Virgin Mary or the saints, or for moral reflection. Finally, another important group consisted of burlesque or satirical *romances*, which aimed to entertain the reader with their jokes.

² See a general approach to *literatura de cordel* in J.-F. Botrel, *Literatura de cordel*, in *Diccionario Español de Términos Literarios*, forthcoming, and *El género de cordel*, in L. Díaz G. Viana (ed.), *Palabras para el pueblo*, vol. 1: *Aproximación general a la literatura de cordel*, Madrid 2001, pp. 41–69.

³ The Sociedad Internacional para el Estudio de las Relaciones de Sucesos (SIERS) has been doing extraordinary work on news accounts for decades.

In addition to poetic *pliegos sueltos*, *literatura de cordel* also includes a group of texts written in prose. On the one hand, we find calendars, forecasts and almanacs, one of the typologies most widely disseminated in Europe⁴. Calendars showed the days of the week, the months and the Christian festivals, almanacs offered astrological events in the coming year, eclipses, conjunctions, and movable feasts, and forecasts predicted the most outstanding events of the year. On the other hand, a second type of *pliego suelto* written in prose was the so-called "historia". Physically, *historias* were longer than *romances*, consisting of several *pliegos* sewn together (between three and eight, giving from 24 to 64 pages). The first titles were those of the so-called *historias caballerescas breves* (short tales of chivalry)⁵. They corresponded to twenty novels of medieval origin that were published as *pliegos de cordel* between 1480 and 1530. A few more titles were added to them as the centuries went by, until these traditional stories were prohibited in 1757 and replaced with a new collection of 40 *historias* published in Madrid (and later in many other cities) by the printer Manuel Martín⁶. During the nineteenth century, the repertoire of *historias* experienced a spectacular boom and over 200 new titles were published. The stories were generally taken from European novelistic literature (Chateaubriand, Dumas, Hugo, etc.) and from contemporary history. Thus, with the passing of the centuries, a group of stories that at the beginning of the *cordel* genre barely constituted a tiny part of the total assortment gradually grew in volume until it became a considerable part of *literatura de cordel*.

In addition to prose and poetry, a very numerous group of *pliegos sueltos* that was characteristic of Spanish printed popular literature consisted of titles derived from the theater. These *pliegos* proliferated especially during the eighteenth century, with the publication of complete plays or parts of plays that mostly came from the Spanish Golden Age. In the first place, individual comedies were published: single plays that generally consisted of no more than 40 pages. Short works, such as *sainetes*, *entremeses*, and *loas*, which were performed in theaters in the intervals of performances of plays, were also published as *pliegos de cordel*. Together with these plays that were printed in their entirety there were theatrical *pliegos sueltos* of another kind, known as *relaciones de comedias* (extracts from plays). They were well-known fragments of plays, consisting of lines spoken by single characters who told the stories of their lives, and they were extracted from the original work and printed as *pliegos sueltos*.

⁴ H.-J. Lüsebrink / Y.-G. Mix / J.-Y. Mollier / P. Sorel (eds.), *Les lectures du peuple en Europe et dans les Amériques du XVIIe au XXe siècle*, Brussels 2003.

⁵ V. Infantes, *La narración caballeresca breve*, and N. Baranda, *Compendio bibliográfico sobre la narrativa caballeresca breve*, both in M.E. Lacarra (ed.), *Evolución narrativa e ideológica de la literatura caballeresca*, Bilbao 1991, pp. 165–181 and 183–191.

⁶ J. Gomis, *Echoes from the Middle Ages: Tales of Chivalry, Romances, and Nation-building in Spain (1750–1850)*, in "Studies in Medievalism", 24, 2015, pp. 93–113.

Relaciones de comedias enjoyed great success in the eighteenth century and formed an outstanding typology in the *cordel* genre. They were very well-known and widely disseminated, as is shown by the fact that printers published "relaciones satíricas o burlescas" (satirical or burlesque extracts), which parodied a *relación de comedia* line by line, altering a few words or phrases and assuming that readers would recognize the original work and the wittiness of the changes that had been made. Finally, another kind of *pliego suelto* derived from the theatre was the type that offered summaries of complete plays or recreated the lives of well-known characters who appeared in comedies from the Golden Age.

The *romances*, *historias*, *relaciones de comedias*, and other *pliegos de cordel* mentioned so far are publications in which text predominates over pictures. However, *literatura de cordel* included works in which images had greater, if not absolute, importance: first, *estampas*, folio or quarto sheets printed on only one side, bearing a picture of a saint. *Estampas* were of a religious nature and fulfilled a devotional, thaumaturgical, and doctrinal function; secondly, *gozos*, leaflets with hymns corresponding to a particular religious appellation, which is represented in a picture of greater or smaller size; thirdly, *aleluyas*, sheets with 48 images printed on one side, similar to the Dutch penny prints, the English catchpenny prints, the German *Bilderbogen* or the French *images d'Épinal*. The term *aleluya* is misleading, because they are not religious prints, and the explanation for it is the dual origin of this typology. On the one hand, in Castile *aleluya* was the name given to sheets of paper with various pictures of saints, which were cut up and thrown in the air in the Easter and Corpus Christi processions.

At the same time, in Catalonia *auques* was the name given to sheets of paper with various rows of images printed on them, which were used in a game of chance and represented things such as the sun and moon, occupations, animals, the world upside down, etc. *Auques* were introduced in Madrid in the middle of the nineteenth century by the Catalan printer José María Marés y Roca. As a result of the formal similarity between *auques* and *aleluyas*, the latter term was applied, first in Madrid and then in the rest of Spain, to printed matter that had nothing to do with religious festivities. The second half of the nineteenth century was the period of greatest popularity for *aleluyas*, which represented many different themes: adaptations of novels, biographies of personalities, episodes of Spanish history, education, city guides, moral instruction, etc.

Thus the physical and textual diversity of the printed material that constitutes *literatura de cordel* is considerable, and this has presented difficulties for research. Since the publication of Julio Caro Baroja's book, three lines of work have been explored in research on *pliegos de cordel*. First, a systematic process has been developed for seeking, cataloguing, and critically examining material dispersed in libraries, archives and private collections. In this respect, special mention must be made of the great work done by Antonio Rodríguez-Moñino, the precursor of many later studies, whose principal contribution in the field of *literatura de cordel* was his *Diccio-*

nario bibliográfico de pliegos sueltos poéticos (siglo XVI)⁷. Following in his wake, many researchers have pursued the traces of *pliegos de cordel*, attempting to make at least a partial reconstruction of a publishing panorama that will always remain incomplete, given the ephemeral nature of these publications, which were for immediate consumption and deteriorated easily.

Secondly, another important group of investigations has concentrated on studying the contents disseminated in *pliegos sueltos*, establishing thematic classifications, analyzing the structure of their content, tracking intertextual relationships between different items and between *pliegos sueltos* and other kinds of printed matter, or linking the cultural representations disseminated by means of *literatura de cordel* with the historical context in which this material appeared. Among the many publications that have taken this approach, particular mention must be made of the studies published by Joaquín Marco and of María Cruz García de Enterría, which are now considered classic works among the studies on *literatura de cordel*⁸.

Finally, a third line of research has focused on the cultural practices that led to the appearance of *pliegos sueltos*: the processes of creation and production of the printed material, the paths of distribution, the agents who sold them, the advertising strategies, the performance associated with reading them, or the diversity of the audiences at which *pliegos de cordel* were aimed. The early works of Jean-François Botrel were pioneers in this field⁹. However, the study of these practices calls for the consultation of archival sources that are difficult to locate, which explains why the volume of work published in this third line of research is perceptibly smaller than in the other two.

2 "Literatura de cordel" from a transnational perspective

Literatura de cordel in Spain, therefore, is now a recognized field of study with a long tradition of research and one that nevertheless continues to arouse interest among philologists, historians, and anthropologists. However, there is one aspect that research on *pliegos de cordel* has neglected until now and that is fundamental if one

7 A. Rodríguez-Moñino, *Nuevo diccionario bibliográfico de pliegos sueltos poéticos (siglo XVI)*, Madrid 1970.

8 J. Marco, *Literatura popular en España en los siglos XVIII y XIX. (Una aproximación a los pliegos de cordel)*, Madrid 1977; M.C. García de Enterría, *Sociedad y poesía de cordel en el Barroco*, Madrid 1973.

9 J.-F. Botrel, *Les aveugles, colporteurs d'imprimés en Espagne, I: La confrérie des aveugles de Madrid et la vente des imprimés, du monopole à la liberté du commerce (1581-1836)*, in "Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez", 9, 1973, pp. 417-482; *Les aveugles, colporteurs d'imprimés en Espagne, II: Des aveugles considérés comme mass-media*, in "Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez", 10, 1974, pp. 233-271; *Aspects de la littérature de colportage en Espagne sous la Restauration*, in *L'infra-littérature en Espagne aux XIXe et XXe siècles. Du roman feuilleton au romancero de la guerre d'Espagne*, Grenoble 1977, pp. 103-121.

wishes to obtain a more complete understanding of the genre. It is the insertion of this cultural phenomenon in a broader context than that of Spain, which would permit the development of a transnational perspective that could be used to establish connections between corpuses of publishing material that are disparate but share certain features that allow us to speak of a European culture of popular publications. It is a fact that the study of popular literature has traditionally been conducted within a national focus, although the isolation of this field of investigation may possibly have been more pronounced in Spain than in other European countries. Apart from a very few exceptions, there are no studies that have proposed an interpretation of *literatura de cordel* from a European viewpoint¹⁰.

In Europe, in recent years, a new impulse has been given to the transnational perspective in the field of studies of popular printed literature, of which the present volume is a good example. Among the causes that explain this rebirth are, of course, the research policies promoted by the European Union, but also the gradual development of the digital humanities, which permit access to an ever greater volume of digitalized printed material, and also, possibly, a desire on the part of the research community to adopt new focuses for an object of study that has been worked on extensively in the framework of national frontiers. In the following pages we will refer to the benefits that a comparative perspective may bring to the study of *literatura de cordel* and, by extension, of popular printed culture in Europe. For this purpose, we will concentrate on three examples that have to do with contents, production strategies and the paths used for the circulation of *pliegos sueltos*.

2.1 Contents: Spanish gallows literature

In a seminal study, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink used the expression “gallows literature” to refer to two kinds of French printed matter that, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, disseminated texts about people who were sentenced to death: the “complainte criminelle” and the “relation”¹¹. In the last few decades, there have been various publications about the development of gallows literature in several European countries, in relation to the study of the death penalty in general¹² and to certain

¹⁰ J.-F. Botrel, *Une bibliothèque bleue espagnole? Les historias de cordel (XVIIIe-XXe siècle)*, in T. Delcourt / E. Parinet (eds.), *La Bibliothèque Bleue et les littératures de colportage*, Paris / Troyes 2000, pp. 193–209; R. Chartier / C. Espejo (eds.), *La aparición del periodismo en Europa: comunicación y propaganda en el Barroco*, Madrid 2012.

¹¹ H.-J. Lüsebrink, *La letteratura del patibolo. Continuità e trasformazioni tra '600 e '800*, in “Quaderni Storici”, 49, 1982, pp. 285–301.

¹² V. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree. Execution and the English People, 1770–1868*, Oxford 1996, pp. 109–221; A. Prosperi, *Delitto e perdono. La pena di morte nell'orizzonte mentale dell'Europa cristiana, XIV-XVIII secolo*, Torino 2013, pp. 503–536.

groups of printed material¹³. Pascal Bastien has recently made an innovative analysis of gallows literature published in France and England: taking Lüsebrink as his starting point, he differentiates between the *complaintes* or "execution ballads" and the *relations*, but inserts them into a much broader publishing context, which includes various printed materials connected with executions¹⁴.

In the case of *pliegos de cordel*, as Gomis emphasised in a recent article¹⁵, there have been no studies specifically on Spanish gallows literature. Until now, historians and literary scholars have presented Spanish execution ballads¹⁶ mixed with a variegated collection of accounts of accidents and crimes described merely as crime reports, without classifying them in the framework of the ritual of punishment. On the basis of all the studies on *pliegos sueltos*, one might think that there was no gallows literature in Spain. However, knowledge of the existence of this printed material in other European countries highlights this assumed absence as an anomaly. The early development of the modern state system in Spain, with all its mechanisms of coercion, and the establishment of a publishing industry in the early days of printing are two factors that make it hard to explain why the Spanish monarchy should not have used execution ballads as an instrument to strengthen its power.

In fact, if we search in the catalogues and lists of *pliegos sueltos* it is not hard to detect titles that speak of the crimes and subsequent punishment of a criminal and therefore, a priori, justify identifying those publications as gallows literature: *Criminoso y fiero caso: sucedido día de San Francisco del año mil quinientos nouenta y dos. Que trata de la diabólica inuención que ciertos vaqueros hizieron para robar el ventero de la venta la Torre, quatro leguas de Gibraltar, y de la justicia que dellos se hizo* (Terrible criminal case: that occurred on the day of Saint Francis in the year fifteen hundred and ninety-two. Which tells of the diabolical deceit perpetrated by some cowherds to rob the landlord of the La Torre inn, four leagues from Gibraltar, and of the justice that was done to them) (1593); *Nueva y verdadera relación, de un lastimoso caso, que*

13 J.A. Sharpe, *Last Dying Speeches: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England*, in "Past & Present", 107, 1985, pp. 144–167; M.-Y. Crépin, *Le chant du cygne du condamné: les testaments de mort en Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle*, in "Revue historique du droit français et étranger", 70, 1992, pp. 491–509; E. Gogniat, *Avouer au seuil du gibet. Enjeu social et judiciaire du testament de mort d'un brigand pendu à Genève en 1787*, in "Crime, Histoire et Sociétés", 8, 2004, pp. 63–84; U. McIlvenna, *The Power of Music: The Significance of Contrafactum in Execution Ballads*, in "Past & Present", 229, 2015, 1, pp. 47–89; R. Salzberg / M. Rospocher, *Murder Ballads: Singing, Hearing, Writing and Reading about Murder in Renaissance Italy*, in K.J.P. Lowe / T. Dean (eds.), *Murder in Renaissance Italy*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 164–185.

14 P. Bastien, *L'exécution publique à Paris au XVIIIe siècle. Une histoire des rituels judiciaires*, Seyssel 2006; *Une histoire de la peine de mort. Bourreaux et supplices, 1500–1800*, Paris 2011.

15 J. Gomis, *Los rostros del criminal: una aproximación a la literatura de patíbulo en España*, in "Cuadernos de la Ilustración y Romanticismo", 22, 2016, pp. 9–33.

16 We use the term "execution ballads" to refer to ballads that told the story of the crimes and punishment of delinquents, in the knowledge that there were physical differences between English broadside ballads and Spanish *pliegos sueltos*.

sucedió a ocho días deste presente mes de Noviembre y año de mil y seiscientos y diez y seis, en la ciudad de Écija, donde se declara el grande estrago y muertes que hizo en casa del Doctor Bermudo, médico, un esclauo suyo, martes al amanecer, y la justicia que del se hizo (New and true account of a pitiful case that happened on the eighth day of this present month of November in the year sixteen hundred and sixteen, in the city of Écija, which tells of the great devastation and murders committed in the house of Doctor Bermudo, medical practitioner, by a slave of his, on Tuesday at dawn, and the justice that was done to him) (1616); *Nuevo romance, en que se refieren, los valerosos hechos, muertes, y atrocidades del valiente Manuel del Castillo, natural de la Ciudad de Toledo, y ajusticiado en Valladolid* (New romance which describes the valorous deeds, murders and atrocities of the valiant Manuel del Castillo, native of the City of Toledo and executed in Valladolid) (1720); *Nuevo y curioso romance. Para que sepan hombres, niños y mugeres el horroroso caso ejecutado en el pueblo de Monterrubio de la Sierra, el día 2 de setiembre de 1841, por Lorenzo Malmierca, castigado a pena de la vida el día 14 de noviembre del año 42* (New and curious ballad. So that men, women and children may know the horrendous case perpetrated in the town of Monterrubio de la Sierra, on September 2, 1841, by Lorenzo Malmierca, sentenced to the penalty of death on November 14, in the year 42).

The criticisms of execution ballads that numerous intellectuals made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also highlight the existence of this sub-genre in Spain. For example, the Count of Campomanes declared that “romances de ajusticiados” (execution ballads) should not be read in schools because they produced “in coarse people the seed of committing offences, and of becoming braggarts, depicting as glorious acts the murders, robberies, and other crimes that led them to execution”; Juan Meléndez Valdés severely criticised the subject matter disseminated in these *pliegos sueltos* (“acts of bravado and the ill-fashioned lives of outlaws and robbers, with outrageous resistance to justice and its ministers, acts of violence and abductions of maidens, cruel murders, disrespect of temples, and other such misdeeds”); and José Marchena drew on his memories to verify the existence of this custom of putting the life and work of those who were condemned to death into verse: “I myself, though not very old, remember that after they hanged a famous thief called Antonio Gómez, a benevolent poet straightaway celebrated his exploits in a ballad that the young children immediately learned and sang”¹⁷. In fact, in 1767 King Carlos III issued a decree forbidding the printing of forecasts, almanacs, “romances de ciegos” (blind singers’ ballads) and, specifically, “coplas de ajusticiados” (execution ballads). The reason for the prohibition was that these texts produced “impresiones perjudiciales

17 P. Rodríguez, Conde de Campomanes, *El fomento de la industria popular. La educación popular de los artesanos*, with a foreword by G. Anes, Oviedo 1991, p. 176; J. Meléndez Valdés, *Obras completas*, edited by A. Astorgano, Madrid 2004, p. 1095; J. Marchena, *Filosofía moral y elocuencia; o Colección de los trozos más selectos de poesía, elocuencia, historia, religión y filosofía moral y política, de los mejores autores castellanos*, vol. 1, Bordeaux, Imprinta de Don Pedro Beaume, 1820, p. XLI.

en el público, además de ser una lectura vana y de ninguna utilidad a la pública instrucción" (harmful impressions upon the public, as well as being vain reading of no utility for public instruction). This was one of the legal measures against *pliegos de cordel* that had most impact in the eighteenth century, and it is significant that it included gallows literature among the sub-genres that were forbidden, which proves the existence and importance of this kind of printed material in Spain.

Finally, we must add another fact that not only confirms the presence of gallows literature in Spain but also provides information about some peculiarities that, as far as we know, have no equivalent in other European countries. In 1748, King Fernando VI granted the blind brotherhood in Madrid a monopoly on the sale of *relaciones de los reos ajusticiados en esta Corte* (accounts of prisoners executed in this court)¹⁸. We shall refer later to the relationship that existed in Spain between blind people and *pliegos de cordel*. What it is important to highlight here is that between 1748 and 1767 the blind in Madrid were responsible for composing, printing, and selling ballads about the crimes and execution of those who were sentenced to death: for this purpose, each time that a death sentence was pronounced the brotherhood asked the authorities for a summary of the sentence so that they could prepare an account of it in verse. A petition that they made in 1751 was expressed as follows: "Please instruct the court clerk for this case to provide us with details of the crimes subject to the proceedings taken against the aforesaid prisoners, in order to prepare an account in verse so that it may serve as a warning, as has been the usage and custom"¹⁹. The monopoly on gallows literature enjoyed by the blind in Madrid indicates an attempt by the political authorities to achieve control of the preparation and dissemination of these publications. However, the idea that these "relaciones de reos" (stories of offenders) were a mere propaganda instrument in the hands of the authorities must be qualified by the constant criticisms that the intellectual elites made against these publications, and especially by the previously mentioned prohibition issued by Carlos III in 1767. It seems that Spanish gallows literature was not such a docile instrument of ideology as one might at first suppose.

The above-mentioned indications enable us to say that gallows literature did indeed exist in Spain, and that specialized studies are needed to determine the distinguishing features of this corpus, to analyze the texts and establish relationships with other sources about criminal cases (legal proceedings, press reports, sermons), and to include the "stories of offenders" in the dynamics of execution, as a further part (prior, simultaneous, or subsequent) of the ritual of punishment²⁰. At any rate, what it

18 J.-F. Botrel, *Les aveugles, colporteurs d'imprimés en Espagne*, I, pp. 440–442.

19 Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Consejos, Libro 1338, fol. 133 "Se sirva mandar al relator de esta causa nos dé los asuntos de los delitos, arreglados a los autos seguidos contra dichos reos, para hacer relación en verso, para que sirva de escarmiento como ha sido uso y costumbre".

20 In the line marked out by J.-F. Botrel, *Crime et châtement de Teresa Guix (1816–1839): du fait-divers à la rédemption par la littérature*, in A. Molinié / M.-C. Zimmermann / M. Ralle (eds.), *Hommage à*

is important to emphasize here is that it is the transnational comparative perspective that has enabled us to highlight this absence in the studies on *literatura de cordel*, encouraging research in an area that had previously been neglected.

2.2 Production: Agustín Laborda and Cluer Dicey

The transnational focus also proves very useful for studying the strategies for the production of popular printed literature. Establishing comparisons between the publishing activities of printers who lived at the same time in different countries makes it possible to cast light on aspects that, either because they are too obvious or because they are too remote, remain in the shadow in studies that keep to familiar ground, restricted to national boundaries.

This can be illustrated with a specific example: Agustín Laborda and Cluer Dicey were printers in Valencia and London in the eighteenth century and their lives ran almost in parallel (1714–1776 in the case of Laborda, 1715–1775 in Dicey's case)²¹. They were two of the most important printers of *pliegos sueltos* and chapbooks in Spain and England in the eighteenth century²². An analysis of their careers highlights the contrasts between the two cases. The ways in which they came to be directors of printing businesses were divergent. Cluer belonged to a family of printers and he was put in charge of the print shop in Bow Churchyard by his father, whereas Agustín entered the printing world at the bottom, as an apprentice, and became the owner of a print shop in Calle Bolsería as a result of his marriage to his master's daughter. The size of the two businesses was also different: the Diceys not only possessed two print shops in London, at Bow Churchyard and (from 1754) at Aldermay Churchyard, but were also proprietors of the "Northampton Mercury" and of a lucrative patent medicine business; Laborda, on the other hand, devoted himself exclusively to managing his small workshop, which had only two presses, and he specialised in the production of *pliegos sueltos*. The socioeconomic levels of the two printers were, again, diverse: Cluer's purchase of Claybrooke Hall, a sumptuous mansion near Northampton, as a holiday home in 1765 contrasts with Agustín's purchase the same year of a modest property in Valencia, which he used both as a home and as a workshop. However, this must not obscure the fact that, as several studies have shown, Laborda's socio-economic rise

Carlos Serrano, vol. 2: *Cultures et écritures*, Paris 2005, pp. 42–54; or by L. Domergue, *Un bandolero frente a la justicia, la literatura y el arte*, in *Actas del seminario de Ilustración aragonesa*, Zaragoza 1987, pp. 170–194.

21 J. Gomis / A. Serrano, *Una aproximación comparada a la imprenta popular del siglo XVIII en España e Inglaterra: Agustín Laborda y Cluer Dicey*, in "Cuadernos de Ilustración y Romanticismo", 24, 2018.

22 J. Gomis, *Menudencias de imprenta. Producción y circulación de la literatura popular (Valencia, siglo XVIII)*, Valencia 2015; V. Neuburg, *Popular Literature. A History and Guide. From the Beginning of Printing to the Year 1897*, Harmondsworth 1977.

was very remarkable: his declared assets in 1743 amounted to 500 pounds, but by the end of his life, in 1776, he had accumulated a fortune of nearly 10,000 pounds.

Despite these disparate origins and situations, Dicey and Laborda shared a similar publishing strategy, concentrating on material that reached a wide audience and basing their strategy on three key factors: mass production, the constant introduction of new material and an expanding distribution network. This strategy is reflected in the catalogues that the two printers produced to publicize their material: a catalogue is a valuable source for the history of a printing business and a useful tool for establishing comparisons of the production of popular printed material in different countries.

On the one hand, in the mid-1760s Agustín published a *Memoria de los Romances, Relaciones, Historias, Entremeses, Estampas, Libros, y otras menudencias, que se hallan en Valencia en la Imprenta de Agustín Laborda y Campo*²³. On the other hand, in 1764 Cluer Dicey and his partner, Richard Marshall, published *A catalogue of maps, prints, copy-books, drawing-books, histories, old ballads, patters, collections, &c. Printed and sold by Cluer Dicey and Richard Marshall, at the Printing Office, in Aldermay Church-Yard, London*²⁴. A comparison between the two catalogues underlines some characteristic features of the publications produced by Laborda and Dicey and of popular printed literature in Spain and England. First, even the appearance of the catalogues is very different: Laborda's catalogue consists of 8 pages and reveals an evident endeavor on the part of the typographer to make the most of the space on the page (with titles closely squeezed together), whereas Dicey-Marshall's extends to 104 pages, with a very generous use of space (complete titles, large section headings, numerous explanations of titles and sections). Secondly, the fact that 80% of the London catalogue is devoted to the maps and prints section establishes another clear distinction between the items produced by Cluer and by Agustín: for the former, these printed images were one of his main publishing lines, as can be gathered from the quantity of them (over 1500) and their position in the catalogue (the title begins with "maps" and "prints"). Laborda also included images in his publications, but they were far fewer and less varied: in his catalogue he announced 122 prints, all on religious themes, whereas the thematic diversity of Dicey's prints was much greater.

If we go on to analyze the printed texts, in quantitative terms Dicey's output is only slightly higher than Laborda's: the former's 153 histories, 105 patters, and 286 ballads compare with the latter's 317 romances, 87 relaciones de comedias, and 44 entremeses. The numbers are similar, amounting to around 500 titles.

²³ The catalogue, reproduced by Jaime Moll, can be consulted in the Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes at <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/un-catalogo-de-pliegos-sueltos-de-la-imprenta-de-agustin-laborda-y-campo/>, accessed June 15, 2018.

²⁴ It can be consulted online at <http://diceyandmarshall.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/refframe.htm>, accessed June 15, 2018.

One of the clearest differences between English and Spanish popular printed literature is the almost absolute predominance of verse in the latter, compared with the powerful presence of prose in English chapbooks. This disparity can be seen distinctly if we analyze the form of expression in the categories that we have just mentioned: *romances*, *relaciones de comedias*, and *entremeses* are all verse compositions, whereas in the English publications there is a balance between prose and verse (258 histories and patters compared with 286 ballads). This difference between street literature and *literatura de cordel* is an indication of the different levels of literacy in English and Spanish society in the eighteenth century, which is also reflected in the physical appearance of the printed material: *romances* were printed on 4 pages, which sometimes extended to 8 if the publication included a second part, and their metrical and narrative systems facilitated reading (often oral), whereas chapbooks offered longer texts (generally between 8 and 24 pages) and their prose required greater reading ability.

Apart from these differences, the catalogues produced by Agustín Laborda and Cluer Dicey both show publishing strategies that concentrate on absorbing the greatest possible number of popular printed materials in order to satisfy the varied nature of the demand and thus cater to a wider range of customers (with regard to age, reading skills or financial situation). This was one of the key factors in their success as printers, and it can be highlighted by a comparative perspective.

2.3 Distribution: the blind brotherhoods and the sale of “pliegos sueltos”

Studies on the distribution of printed matter in Europe have considered the role of the pedlar or colporteur from various points of view, recently from a transnational perspective²⁵. In the case of *literatura de cordel*, one of the most characteristic features of its dissemination was the participation of the blind in the sale of printed material.

Although we know of individual cases of blind poets and sellers of *pliegos de cordel* in the sixteenth century²⁶, it was not until the second half of the seventeenth century that the blind took a collective interest in popular printed literature. Starting in the Late Middle Ages, a series of blind brotherhoods had been founded in various

25 L. Fontaine, *Histoire du colportage en Europe, XVe–XIXe siècle*, Paris 1993; J. Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press: Itinerant Distribution Networks in England and the Netherlands, 1600–1850*, Boston MA / Leiden 2014; R. Harms / J. Raymond / J. Salman (eds.), *Not Dead Things. The Dissemination of Popular Print in England and Wales, Italy and the Low Countries, 1500–1820*, Boston MA / Leiden 2013.

26 A. Rodríguez-Moñino, *Cristóbal Bravo, ruiñeñor popular del siglo XVI (intento bibliográfico, 1572–1963)*, in A. Rodríguez-Moñino, *La transmisión de la poesía española en los siglos de oro*, Barcelona 1976, pp. 253–283; P.M. Cátedra, *Invención, difusión y recepción de la literatura popular impresa (siglo XVI)*, Mérida 2002.

cities in Spain. Their initial objectives were mutual aid among their members and the performance of prayers in the streets²⁷. In 1680, in Madrid, the brotherhoods of Our Lady of the Visitation and Souls in Purgatory embarked on a series of lawsuits against various booksellers and printers because of the sale of *pliegos de cordel*²⁸. This legal confrontation continued during the early decades of the eighteenth century until, in 1727, King Felipe V signed a Royal Resolution that nobody except the blind and their widows should be allowed to sell "gacetas y otros papeles curiosos" (gazettes and other curious papers). In 1739, the printed matter that came under the monopoly of the Madrid brotherhood was specified: items that did not exceed four pages, in other words, a *pliego suelto*. And, as we have mentioned, in 1748 the privilege was extended to the "relaciones de los reos ajusticiados" (accounts of prisoners executed).

Until recent years, the case of the blind brotherhood in Madrid and their monopoly on the sale of *pliegos de cordel* was the only one that we knew of in Spain. A similar privilege that King Fernando VI granted in 1749 to the brotherhoods of the True Cross in Valencia has recently been studied. Between that year and 1770, when the privilege was ended, the Valencian brotherhood jealously defended the prerogative concerning the sale of printed matter that had been given to them, with a series of complaints against anyone who did not respect their monopoly: printers, booksellers, pedlars and even "falsos pobres y estropeados" (false poor and cripples)²⁹. There are indications that the brotherhoods in Málaga, Granada, Córdoba, Cádiz, and Murcia were able to enjoy similar monopolies during the second half of the eighteenth century.

There were two reasons why the state granted these privileges to the blind brotherhoods. On the one hand, it is evident that it was an attempt to offer a means of subsistence to a social group especially exposed to indigence and begging. On the other hand, through these monopolies the State tried to control the circulation of potentially dangerous printed matter. By reducing the number of sellers to the blind who belonged to a particular brotherhood, the authorities provided themselves with an effective means for keeping watch over printers, sellers, and readers of literature that, because of its low cost and quick production, had proved recalcitrant to the control of the censor for centuries. From this point of view, the blind were, as Botrel said, "colaboradores objetivos del poder" (objective collaborators with the authorities)³⁰.

The comparative perspective can cast light on our interpretation of the blind brotherhoods in Spain and the sale of *pliegos de cordel* in various ways. First, it allows us to contextualize the supposed exceptionality of the phenomenon of blind brotherhoods, often understood as a Spanish peculiarity. On the contrary, the tendency of the blind to organize themselves in brotherhoods was common in Europe, and,

²⁷ J. Gomis, *Pious Voices. Blind Spanish Prayer Singers*, in "Renaissance Studies", 33, 2019, 1, pp. 42-63.

²⁸ C. Espejo, *Pleito entre ciegos e impresores (1680-1755)*, in "Revista de la Biblioteca, Archivo y Museo", 2, 1925, pp. 206-236.

²⁹ J. Gomis, *Menudencias de imprenta*.

³⁰ J.-F. Botrel, *Les aveugles, colporteurs d'imprimés en Espagne*, I, p. 428.

although this is a field in which little work has been done, we know of their existence in a considerable number of cities. For example, in Paris, from the middle of the thirteenth century, there was the Quinze-Vingts hospice, a community of blind people that functioned in a way that, according to Zina Weygand, is reminiscent of the mendicant orders. Another hospice, inspired by the Quinze-Vingts, was founded in Chartres in 1291 by Renaud Barbou (the elder)³¹. In Sarrant, a town in Gascony, there was a brotherhood of the blind that bore the name of Our Lady of the Visitation³². In the German context, Irina Metzler has located a corporation of the blind in Strasburg, founded in 1411, another brotherhood for “poor people who live from prayers, such as cripples, the blind and other people”, founded in Zülrich in 1454, and another brotherhood of the blind and deaf in Tréveris, the founding of which dates back to 1437³³. A considerable number of blind brotherhoods were concentrated in Italy. We find them in Genoa (1299), Venice (1315), Florence (1324), Padua (1358), Milan (1471), Bologna (1566), Rome (1613), Siena (1624), and Palermo (1661)³⁴. Finally, Portugal also had a blind brotherhood, the Sociedade do Menino Jesus dos Homens Cegos, founded in Lisbon in 1749³⁵.

Secondly, the international perspective allows us to identify the possession of a monopoly on the sale of popular printed matter that was enjoyed by some Spanish blind brotherhoods in the eighteenth century as a genuinely Spanish singularity. Only the brotherhood in Lisbon had a similar privilege, and it is possible that it was founded for that purpose, taking as a model the brotherhoods in Madrid and Valencia, which had already obtained their respective monopolies. As far as we know, the brotherhoods of the blind in the rest of Europe did not have any connection with the sale of printed matter, nor did any of the numerous Italian brotherhoods, which in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in common with the Spanish brotherhoods, practiced the occupation of reciting prayers. Therefore, the importance that the blind

31 Z. Weygand, *Vivre sans voir. Les aveugles dans la société française, du Moyen Age au siècle de Louis Braille*, Paris 2003.

32 C. Gilard-Fito, *La confrérie des musiciens de Sarrant aux 16 et 17 siècles*, in “Bulletin de la Société Archéologique, Historique, Littéraire & Scientifique du Gers”, 3, 2002, pp. 304–338.

33 I. Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment*, New York / Abingdon 2013, pp. 179–181.

34 L. Carnelos, *Street Voices. The Role of Blind Performers in Early Modern Italy*, in “Italian Studies”, 71, 2016, pp. 184–196; R. Cessi, *La Fraternità dei ciechi in Padova*, in “Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova”, 8, 1905, pp. 105–114; L. Cajani, *Gli statuti della compagnia dei ciechi, zoppi e stroppiati della Visitazione (1698)*, in “Ricerche per la storia religiosa di Roma”, 3, 1979, pp. 281–313; *Compagnia di Santa Maria del Giglio detta dei Ciechi*, in L. Artusi / A. Patruno (eds.), *Deo gratias. Storia, tradizioni, culti e personaggi delle antiche confraternite fiorentine*, Roma 1994, pp. 250–253; D. Zardin, *La mendicizia tollerata. La ‘scola’ milanese dei ciechi di S. Cristoforo e le sue regole (sec. XVI–XVIII)*, in F. Ruggeri (ed.), *Studi in onore di mons. Angelo Majo*, Milano 1996, pp. 355–380.

35 F. Guedes, *Os Livreiros em Portugal e as suas associações desde o século XV até aos nossos dias*, Lisboa 2005, p. 28.

brotherhoods officially acquired in the sale of *pliegos de cordel* is a special feature in the history of the peddling of printed matter in Europe.

Thirdly, with regard to this last point, the fact that it is an exceptional feature does not, of course, mean that this phenomenon cannot be studied in a European framework. On the contrary, connecting the Spanish situation with those of other countries makes it possible to articulate an interpretation that extends beyond national boundaries. The granting of monopolies to the blind brotherhoods can be understood, as we have noted, as an attempt by the State to control the dissemination of *pliegos sueltos*. This kind of censorship would not focus on the printed material but on the intermediary who transported and distributed it. Similar attempts, aimed at pedlars or colporteurs, can be identified in other countries like England, with increasing regulation stemming from the introduction of the *Act for licensing Hawkers and Pedlars* in 1697, the Netherlands, with legislation that was progressively more hostile towards peddlers from 1660³⁶, France, with tight control on peddling in the middle of the nineteenth century, a measure that was accompanied by a renewed impulse in terms of preventive censorship, or Italy, where religious and civic authorities increasingly attempted to regulate the book trade³⁷. Thus, the case of the blind brotherhoods in Spain could be situated within a broader dynamic in which the distribution of books and printed matter became an objective for the civil authorities, who in this way tried to increase their control over printed matter.

3 Conclusions

Like the corpuses of popular printed matter in other European countries, *literatura de cordel* has a research history that goes back half a century. The location, cataloguing and reproduction of *pliegos sueltos*, and research on their contents, their production and dissemination processes, and their readership have helped to shape a dynamic and established field of study. However, it is a field of study that is still being presented now in isolation from the European context, without creating connections with other popular forms of printed literature. In our view, this transnational perspective could provide a new approach to research on *literatura de cordel*. The examples suggested in these pages, concerning the contents, production and dissemination of *pliegos sueltos*, show how greatly a comparative focus can enrich our understanding of this cultural phenomenon. With regard to gallows literature, the transnational focus has made it possible to distinguish a sub-genre that had previously been ignored in Spain. In the area of production, the comparison between the publishing activities of

³⁶ J. Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*.

³⁷ J.-J. Darmon, *Le colportage de librairie en France sous le Second Empire. Grands colporteurs et culture populaire*, Paris 1972.

Agustín Laborda and Cluer Dicey emphasises the diversity of the strategies of printers who specialised in popular literature and it highlights aspects of *literatura de cordel* that would remain neglected if they were not contrasted with other European corporuses. Finally, placing the importance of the blind brotherhoods in the dissemination of *pliegos sueltos* in relation with the roles of the pedlar or colporteur beyond the boundaries of Spain makes it possible to enrich our understanding of the circulation of popular printed matter throughout the length and breadth of Europe. Thus the benefits of the transnational perspective are twofold: an improvement in our knowledge of *literatura de cordel* (or the popular corpus in any other country) and of European popular printed culture in general.